HISTORY OF BARNEY'S PRAIRIE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The history of Barney's Prairie Christian Church begins when this immediate section of the state was new and wild. Settlers were widely scattered and life was very primitive. Wild beasts roamed the prairies and forests. Life on the frontier was hazardous and uncertain but the soil was fertile and the climate beneficial. Hardy people kept coming from the more developed areas of this young nation eager to build homes in the new land of promise. Most of them were Christian men and women who brought their religion with them into the wilderness of the west. Among them was a group that settled in Wabash County near the Wabash River a few miles north of Mount Carmel. William Barney, his wife, Jerusha (Jepson) Barney, and their nine children(George, William who married Mary Wood, Richard, James, Betsy, June, Sarah, Clara and Ann) came from New York State in 1808. Leaving their boats in the river, they started out in search of a new home. On a beautiful stretch of fertile prairie land, where the prairie grass grew ten feet high, they settled. This prairie was fringed with majestic oaks and lovely maples. This section later became known as Barney's Prairie.

Other settlers soon came and participated in the formation of a desired Fellowship known as Barney's Prairie Christian Church or the Church of Christ at Barney's Prairie. It is difficult to establish charter members, but a cross-section of the early members were: Angelina Pool; Peter , Jemima and Daniel Keen; Leah Wood; Enoch and Daniel Greathouse; Mary Gard; Susan Fordyce; Joseph and Abigail Preston; Jerry Ballard; Mary (Wood) Barney; Job and Abigail Pixley; Philo and William Ingraham; Mary(Barney) Higgins ; Mrs. John Higgins; Sophia (Higgins) Brown; Cynthia (Higgins) Couch; George and Catharine Litherland; John and Charlotte McNair; William and Cynthia Courter; Eber Putnam; John and Henry Shadle; Therim Taylor; Samuel, Leafy and Trifosa Putnam; Olive and Hannah Chaffee; Ira Keen and Priscilla Wood. Membership in 1819 was 71 and in 1823 the membership was 103.

On the frontier, it appears that churches were the heart of each community. An understanding of the early settlers is enhanced by knowledge of the institutions that were important to them. The leaders in Barney's Prairie Christian Church were also leaders in the local community and territory. The proximity of Palmyra, the Edwards County seat in 1815, to the church places the Barney's Prairie Christian Church in the center of activities.

Barney's Prairie Christian Church is part of a frontier denomination which resulted from the Stone-Campbell movement in the early part of the 19th century. The church had a significant influence on the advance of the frontier, as well as, an influence on the spirituality of the people of that time. In the early part of the 19th century, the Stone-Campbell movement, which became the Christian Church was born in a country where the self-sufficient, freedom-loving Americans had won their independence. This success and the opening of the frontier produced a people of confidence in their abilities and a great feeling of individuality. It follows that this feeling of confidence and individuality would be reflected in their churches.

Barney's Prairie Christian Church was organized July 17, 1819. A few Christian men met midway between Fort Wood to the southwest; Fort Compton to the northeast; Fort Barney to the northwest; and Palmyra, an old Indian village, to the southeast. Here, at a ford across a stream where the loading roads from fort to fort and to Palmyra the Indian village crossed, was a logical place to meet. This ford was called Arrow Point, from the fact that the Indians manufactured their artillery here. Here, in the deep forest, noble men met and the record states they desired a fellowship. They organized a church by electing Seth Gard as Elder, Joseph Wood as Deacon and Jairus Fordyce as clerk. These men were true leaders with exceptional influence and abilities. Seth Gard in 1814 was a member of the Third Territorial Legislature and in 1818 a member of the convention which framed the constitution for the State. Later he was County Judge. Joseph Wood was a man of affairs. He was commissioner of post roads and a real pioneer. A son, grandson, or great grandson of Joseph Wood was in the officiary of this church from its beginning in 1819 until the death of Albert Wood in 1995. Jairus Fordyce was a faithful recorder. He kept for many years a true record of the church which provided the fact that Barney's Prairie Christian Church was the first Christian Church organized in Illinois.

Elder James Pool (Poole) was the first minister of Barney's Prairie Christian Church. Before coming to Barney's Prairie, he had traveled to Hamilton County, Ohio sometime before 1815. He became interested in the preaching of Barton W. Stone and Walter Scott. Legend has it that he, Seth Gard, and Peter Keen went horseback through the timber of Ohio to hear Barton W. Stone preach.